

ARTICLE
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The dinosaurs' last race

WASHINGTON—Some time around 1990, a Soviet fighter pilot flying over the Black Sea will look down, see a speck on the ocean and try to do what no Soviet pilot has ever done before: Land on a full-scale aircraft carrier.

"This is crazy," he will say to himself as he aims at the tiny, bobbing deck and sees the cables stretched across it. He will be right. Landing a hot fighter on a carrier deck is a risky business in the best of circumstances, and this Russian pilot won't even have had an instructor who can confidently tell him how to do it. He will be the first.

In an act of military madness, the Russians are spending billions of roubles to match a technology the United States initiated in 1911 and has been perfecting for the past 75 years—the dangerous, complex art of launching and recovering high-performance fighter aircraft on a ship at sea.

The new Soviet carrier is already under construction at Nikolayev. It will be about 1,000 feet long and displace 65,000 to 75,000 tons—not quite as big as our biggest Nimitz-class carriers. Sea trials could begin in 1988, and full operational capacity would occur in the mid-1990s.

Building the carrier is the easy

part. The Russians will then have to learn how to launch a fighter with a steam catapult so that it doesn't go off the end of the deck and fall into the water. They will have to learn how to guide an incoming plane down to where its tailhook can catch the arresting cables and screech the plane to a halt.

They will have to train deck crews that can move just-landed planes out of the way quickly enough so that the next plane, low on fuel, can land. They will have to overhaul it constantly; the U.S., with 13 carriers, can only keep about six of them at sea while the rest are in port. The Soviet Navy, even today, deploys only 15% of its fleet away from home waters.

Even with 75 years of experience carrier operations are costly and dangerous—and the Russians have no experience.

Why are they starting now? The official answer, given by Adm. John Butts, director of Naval Intelligence, is to be able to operate high-performance aircraft at sea, threaten our ships, project Soviet military power

far from Soviet shores and maybe engage in a little gunboat diplomacy.

What are they actually getting for their money? The unofficial answer, given by a defense analyst: "A fat

target that we can bottle up in port before it ever gets to sea." To defend their carrier, the Russians will have to build escort ships for air defense. And if it does get to sea, not only could we sink it, but more than 40 Third World nations already possess guided anti-ship missiles that could send it to the bottom.

Why are the Russians really building a carrier? Most probably because we have them, and they want to be like us—regardless of the cost or the military

effectiveness. It wouldn't be the first time: Their TU-4 bomber was a direct copy of our B-29, but without the range to make it an effective bomber.

When they saw our swing-wing FB-111, they built the Mig-23, which also has swing-wings. They now have 1,750 Mig-23s, and they are an expensive disaster. The pilots can barely see out of them, they use a radar missile that doesn't work, they can't

turn sharply enough in a dog-fight, they leave a tell-tale trail of smoke, and if they stall, they tend to crash. But they have wings that swing back and forth—just like our FB-111.

Their Mig-25 was built to shoot down a high-altitude bomber, the B-70—which we never built. They have hundreds of Mig-25s. The Soviet defense program wastes billions of roubles, trying to match us. This would be a wonderful thing—except that we then use our calculations of Soviet military spending, wasteful or not, to justify our own giant defense build-up. If they're spending, we've got to spend.

THE CIA AND the Defense Department keep arguing about just how much the Russians spend—whether it's 2% growth a year or 8%—so that we don't fall behind.

We shouldn't discourage the Russians from throwing away their money on an aircraft carrier. It's money they won't be able to spend on more dangerous weapons, like nuclear submarines. But instead of laughing at their military lunacy, we doggedly claim we have to make the same sacrifices for defense that they do.

Who's crazier, the Russians wasting billions on a carrier or us trying to outspend them?



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